

Taming Montgomery's unions

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MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S public employees unions, coddled for years with unsustainably large increases in salary and benefits, have grown into unmanageable giants. In other localities, officials have taken a more matter-of-fact approach to painful cost-cutting, including layoffs, furloughs and salary freezes. In Montgomery, where unions boast openly about their ability to install and remove the very elected officials who set union members' salaries, politicians feel they must tiptoe so as not to provoke the county's dyspeptic labor leaders.

That's the ugly context in which Nancy Floreen (D-At Large), president of the Montgomery County Council, commissioned a report last spring on the contributing factors to the county's gaping structural deficit - specifically, personnel costs, which account for more than 80 percent of tax-supported public spending. The results of that study are in, and they are eye-opening. With luck, they will create a political environment in which the unions will come to the bargaining table this winter prepared to make the sort of hard concessions that private-sector workers have been making for some time.

The report, by the county's independent Office of Legislative Oversight, presents some arresting numbers. In a decade, salaries for county workers jumped by 50 percent, and health and pension benefits soared by a mind-blowing 120 percent. For every dollar it spends on salaries, the county spends about 52 cents on benefits, up from 35 cents a decade ago. The report includes a series of charts that illustrate that salaries for county workers in a broad range of employment categories are now higher than in Fairfax and Arlington counties or virtually any other area locality.

As in many other places, Montgomery's revenue growth in the coming years is projected at just half the past decade's level. Barring further steep tax increases - on top of a burden that is already among the highest in the region - there is simply no money available to support more fat union contracts.

As a constructive first step toward recognizing that reality, council member Valerie Ervin (D-Silver Spring), who is set to become council president next month, has offered legislation that would require arbitrators in contract disputes between the county and the unions to give priority consideration to Montgomery's budgetary and fiscal situation - in other words, its ability to pay. The bill would create a more level playing field for contract negotiations that unions have dominated for years based on their certainty that arbitrators would rule in their favor.

It's an eminently reasonable proposal; predictably, union leaders have attacked it in venomous terms. With luck, council members who have quaked at such snarling in the past will find some spine and stand up for fiscal responsibility. And if the current round of contract negotiations yields more unaffordable concessions to labor, the council should

consider amending the county charter to scrap collective bargaining. Fairfax has managed well without it; Montgomery can, too.